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ABSTRACT

The literacy skills of General Educational Development (GED) program graduates were compared to those of high school graduates and high school dropouts who did not pass the GED test. The sample of 1,012 young adults (ages 21 to 25 years) studied was obtained by selecting all Whites, African Americans, and Hispanics who were studied in the Young Adult Literacy Survey and who did not have any college education. Among the key findings of the study were the following: GED completers performed significantly better on literacy tests than did high school dropouts; although high school graduates performed slightly better on literacy tests than GED completers did, the actual differences were marginal; race/ethnicity was the most important demographic predictor of literacy performance, followed by mother's educational attainment; newspaper reading was a significant predictor of higher literacy performance; and females' performance in prose, document, and quantitative literacy was uniformly slightly higher than that of their male counterparts. It was concluded that participation in GED programs appears to help individuals gain the literacy skills valued by many employers and that it would, therefore, be premature to abandon GED programs. (MN)

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BRIEF

What Can Employers Assume About the Literacy Skills of GED Graduates?

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Based on NCAL Technical Report TR93-05
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KEY FINDINGS:

- GED completers performed significantly better on literacy tests than did high school dropouts.
- Although high school graduates performed slightly better on literacy tests than did GED completers, the actual differences were marginal.
- Race/ethnicity was the most important demographic predictor of literacy performance, followed by the mother's educational attainment.
- Newspaper reading was a significant predictor of higher literacy performance.
- Females performed uniformly higher than males in prose, document, and quantitative literacy, though the differences were small.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS:

- It is premature to abandon GED programs since there appear to be reliable benefits that accrue from being in these programs with respect to skills that employers may value.

INTRODUCTION

Students who leave high school before graduation have four avenues for obtaining a high school degree or its equivalent. Of these four alternatives, the GED Tests are the most popular and account for about one sixth of all high school diplomas awarded in the last few years. From 1971 to 1991, 8.5 million persons received high school diplomas as a result of passing the GED Tests. This report reviews the history and impact of the GED program and the content of the GED Tests, and then goes on to discuss the question—What can employers assume about the literacy skills of GED graduates?

METHODOLOGY

This study tested whether or not GED-certified students possess literacy skills comparable to those of high school graduates over and above what can be accounted for by demographic characteristics and individual literacy-related activities. A comparison was also made of the literacy skills of GED graduates and of high school dropouts who did not pass the GED Tests.

A subsample of 1012 young adults, ranging in age from 21 to 25 years, was selected from the Young Adult Literacy Survey (YALS). The subsample was obtained by selecting all Caucasians, African Americans, and Hispanics who did not have any college education and who had either (a) graduated from high school, (b) dropped out of high school and neither studied for nor passed the GED Tests, (c) dropped out of high school and studied for the GED Tests but did not pass them, or (d) dropped out of high school but passed the GED Tests. These educationally differentiated groups were also different according to variables and measures of literacy-related activities. The groups comprised the three predictors in the study. The dependent variables were the Prose, Document, and Quantitative literacy scales of the YALS. The analysis focused on the occupational group of operatives, service workers, and laborers.

IMPLICATIONS

Young adult job applicants with a GED diploma are roughly equivalent to high school graduates in literacy skills (the statistical differences are small),

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and significantly better than high school dropouts. However, it is unclear whether GED completers already possessed higher literacy skills on leaving high school than those high school dropouts who did not go on and complete the GED Tests.

FURTHER READING

Baldwin, J. (1990). GED candidates: A decade of change. *GED Profiles: Adults in Transition*, 1-4

Cameron, S. V., & Heckman, J. J. (1993). The nonequivalence of high school equivalents. *Journal of Labor Economics, 11*, 1-47.

Kirsch, I. S., & Jungeblut, A. (1986). *Literacy: Profiles of America's young adults* (Report No. 16-PL-01). Princeton, NJ: National Assessment of Educational Progress.

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